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CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION REPORT

After the revolutionary war, the United States needed a new constitution. We created the Articles of Confederation and made it our constitution. However, this constitution did not work well at all. It had an extremely weak central government with no president or court system. It had one branch, a unicameral (one house) legislature. Since the central government’s powers were so limited, it could not impose taxes on any of the states or regulate trade. States didn’t even have a common currency. The U.S. was in debt from the war, and each state was imposing taxes on goods from other states to gain money. Rebellions began to occur. The states realized that they needed to revise the constitution, so they each sent delegates (except for Rhode Island) to Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. This became known as the Constitutional Convention

Georgia sent four delegates to the Constitutional Convention - William Few, William Houston, William Pierce, and Abraham Baldwin. However, the only signatures on the document by Georgia delegates were by William Few and Abraham Baldwin. Houston and Pierce were not present for the signing.

Abraham Baldwin was born in Connecticut and graduated from Yale College. He moved to Georgia in 1784. Even though he was a Georgia delegate, he voted with the smaller states for the New Jersey plan. This plan called for each state to be equally represented in Congress. Its’ rival plan, the Virginia Plan called for representation to be based on population. This caused a tie in votes between the plans which led to the Great Compromise, which said there would be two houses, a Senate and a House of Representatives. Each state would send two representatives to the Senate and send a number of representatives to the House of Representatives based on population. He served 18 years in congress afterward (ten in the House and eight in the Senate). He also was one of the six trustees who helped found University Georgia.

William Few was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He had little schooling and was mostly self-educated. During the War of Independence, he supported the Whig cause. He was absent to constitutional convention during all of July and part of August, however, he was one of the two Georgia delegates who signed the constitution. He also helped contribute votes at important times. He served in the Georgia assembly in 1777, 1779, 1783, and 1793. He also served in the Continental Congress. He was one of Georgia’s first U.S. senators in 1789-1793.

In the convention, one big debate was how to determine the number of representatives from each state to be sent to Congress. Larger states with higher populations voted for the Virginia Plan, which stated that the number of representatives would be based on the population of each state. This plan also stated that there would be a stronger central government that could even veto new state laws.

Smaller states with smaller populations voted for the New Jersey Plan, which stated that each state would send the same amount of representatives to Congress, regardless of population. This plan had a weak central government. Once Baldwin tied the votes between the two plans, the convention had to create a compromise.

The Great Compromise was created, which was called the Connecticut Plan. It was proposed by Roger Sherman, a delegate from Connecticut. It created a bicameral legislature that had a House of Representatives, and a Senate. The representation in the House would be based on population. The Senate would have two representatives per state in it. In the end, congress gained some powers, but was not given the power to veto new state laws. Also, the southern states made sure that congress could not regulate slave trade for at least twenty years.

There was a debate between the northern and southern states on whether or not to count slaves as part of the population when determining taxation and representation in the House of Representatives. Southern states wanted slaves to be counted for more political power, but northern states did not since their slave population was not as large. The members of the convention came up with a plan called the Three-Fifths compromise. It stated that 3/5 of the slaves would be counted as population when determining representation.

The new U.S. constitution had three branches: an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. In order to keep any one of the branches from taking control of the government, they used the ideas of separation of powers and checks and balances. Separation of powers meant that each branch had its own job and no branch could do the job of another. Checks and balances meant that each branch had some power over the others. For example, the president can veto a law passed by the legislative branch, but if enough people vote for it in the legislature, then they can override the veto. Also, the central government was given some powers, and states were also given some powers, so both the central and state governments shared the power.

Georgia agreed to the ratification only if there would be a Bill of Rights added to state people’s freedoms. We were the fourth state to approve the new U.S. Constitution. Georgia ratified it on January 2, 1788. The convention decided that there must be at least nine states to approve it in order for it to be accepted. New Hampshire was the ninth state to agree to it.

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